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ABSTRACT

Described in this discussion are the development and implementation of a curriculum on aging for first- through sixth-grade students. The purpose of the "On Growing Older" curriculum was to help children develop a deeper awareness, understanding, and acceptance of the aging process and to encourage appreciation of contributions made to society by older people. Major components of the curriculum development project included planning, writing, field-testing, evaluating, and revising. A set of activities for each grade level was composed, each providing background information and describing objectives and procedures. Activities, intended for use individually or in small or large groups, were designed to be integrated into the regular curriculum or taught as separate units. At the conclusion of field-testing, participating teachers completed a questionnaire, and participating fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-grade students and a control group not receiving instruction completed the Children's Attitudes toward the Elderly scale. Treatment and control groups in first through third grades were administered similar, simplified scales. It was concluded that, while the curriculum made a contribution to the education of children that is valued by teachers, the specific nature of the impact is unclear. (RH)

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The Impact of a Curriculum on Aging on Elementary School Students

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the development of a curriculum on aging for students in grades 1 to 6. The participating teachers reported on a structured questionnaire that the curriculum had a positive impact in students' attitudes toward aging and older adults although student attitude tests revealed significant positive change on only a few items. The discussion of these findings concludes that the curriculum may be satisfying an important educational goal as perceived by the teachers but that the intervention period may have been too brief for the attitude tests to reveal change. Finally, it is noted that positive attitudes were revealed by all students including students in the control group.

INTRODUCTION

Most Americans now recognize that America is aging and that the older population is growing at a faster rate than the total population. "Between 1970 and 1980, for example, the population age 60 and over in the United States grew by about 18 percent, while the total population expanded by nine percent" (Aging in North America, 1981, p. 80). According to the 1980 census information, life expenctancy at birth is now over 73 years of age, and persons living to age 65 can expect to live for an average of 16 more years.

Americans are not only living longer, they are also maintaining their health longer. The sight of active people in their 70s and 80s is no longer unusual. In light of these current realities related to the aging of America, there is a growing importance for all of us to understand the aging process and to examine our stereotypes about and attitudes toward older adults.

Most of the research that has been conducted on the attitudes of Americans from several age groups toward aging and older people reveals that their attitudes toward aging are ambivalent at best (Tuckman and Lorge, 1953; Kogan and Shelton, 1962; Kastenbaum and Durkee, 1964; McTavish, 1971; Jantz et al., 1976). The picture that emerges from these studies is that, as a whole, Americans tend to look unfavorably at the prospect of their own aging and frequently accept the negative stereotypes of old age as filled with loneliness and poor health. Furthermore, those studies reporting on children's attitudes toward growing old and older adults reveal essentially the same general conclusions (Hickey and Kalish, 1968; Seefeldt et al., 1981; Page et al., 1981).

The implications of these findings, expecially those regarding children's attitudes toward older adults and the aging process, are particularly significant for the education of young Americans. In view of the fact that children today can expect to live longer and healthier lives than any preceding generation, it is important that they develop informed attitudes toward aging and older adults. This will not only contribute to their healthy aging, but it will also help to reduce the divisiveness within our society between the young and old--a circumstance frequently referred to as ageism.

One way that educators can contribute to the formation of informed attitudes toward aging and older people is by introducing planned learning experiences on aging at all levels of the school curriculum. The discussion which follows describes the development and implementation of a curriculum on aging for students in grades 1 to 6 and reports on the impact of this curriculum on the students and their teachers.

Description of the Curriculum

On Growing Older, the title of this curriculum on aging for students in grades 1 to 6, was developed between 1980-82 by a consortium of institutions in Western Pennsylvania representing higher education, public schools, and private schools. Directing the curriculum development effort was Generations Together, a program of the University of Pittsburgh's Center for Social and Urban Research. The other collaborating institutions were, the Pittsburgh Diocese and three small public school districts outside the city of Pittsburgh. The impetus for this curriculum development project came from the participating school systems, whose teachers and students were already involved with older adults in a Senior Citizen School Volunteer Program. The administrators and teachers from these systems recognized the positive effect of the interaction between the senior citizen volunteers and the students and responded to the students' interest in learning more about aging and older adults.

The purpose of On Growing Older therefore is to help children develop a deeper awareness, understanding, and acceptance of the aging process and an appreciaition of the contributions made to society by older people. The goals for the entire curriculum, grades 1 to 6, are to enable children to:

- describe aging as a natural process of human development.
- accept with understanding and caring the older members of their communities.
- compare the roles and treatment of older people in different cultures and identify the values reflected in the different patterns of treatment of older people.
- locate themselves in the aging process and describe expectations for a quality life which people have at different stages of the aging process.
- recognize and provide examples of the contributions that older adults make to their families, their communities, and to society in general, including the contributions of elders throughout history.
- describe the diversity of roles, responsibilities, and concerns of older adults and how they affect their life style choices.
- describe the basic human needs of older adults and youth and explain how youth and older adults can help each other to satisfy some of their needs.
- explain the importance of assuring that people of all ages and cultures have equal opportunities to fulfill their basic human rights.

For each of grades 1 to 6, a set of activities has been written, with each activity containing the following three components.

1. Background - a statement of purpose and an overview of the major concepts and issues developed in the activity.
2. Objectives - statements of the intended student learning outcomes.
3. Procedures - suggested guidelines, key student questions related to the presentation of the lessons, masters for student worksheets and transparencies, special notes for teachers and other supporting materials.

The activities planned for each grade, furthermore, are varied; they are designed for use by individual as well as small and large groups of students, and incorporate children's books, photographs, filmstrips, movies, and records. Children are directed to conduct interviews with older adults, write original prose or poetry, prepare an art project, improvise structural role-play situations, and interact with older adults in their families or neighborhoods.

By design, the sets of activities for each grade level that comprise On Growing Older are structured either to be integrated into the regular school curriculum or to be taught as a separate unit of study. The integration is easily accomplished by teachers because the activities build on basic tool skills (e.g., reading, oral expression, creative writing, computation) and select content common to health and social studies curricula at each grade level.

Curriculum Development Process

The major components of this curriculum development project included planning, writing, field-testing, evaluating, and revising. The planning was accomplished by an advisory committee assembled expressly for this purpose. This committee was composed of school administrators and teachers, senior citizens, gerontologists, human development psychologists, sociologists, curriculum cevelopers, program staff of senior centers and agencies on aging,

and representatives of such community organizations as the children's museum, Council of Three Rivers American Indian Center, and a local welfare planning agency. Facilitated by the project staff, the planning committee evaluated and approved the project goals, established a topical scope and sequence for On Growing Older, and recommended general guidelines for the structural elements to be included in the curriculum.

Following the work of the advisory planning committee, writing teams for each of grades 1 to 6 were formed. Each writing team was composed of teachers from the target grades along with a gerontologist, human development psychologist, curriculum developer, and project staff from the University of Pittsburgh. The teachers played a major role in helping to ensure that this curriculum could be integrated into the established school curriculum, that the instruction was appropriate for their students, and that the activities were attractive to and usable by teachers. The product of each writing team was a set of activities for each grade level that was designed to stand alone or be integrated into each teacher's curriculum. The project staff provided a consistency across the writing teams that resulted in a uniformity of format presentation for the curriculum at each grade level.

The draft curriculum was then systematically field-tested in six classrooms at each of grades 1 to 6, distributed among the four collaborating school systems. Half of these classrooms into which On Growing Older was introduced also had a senior citizen school volunteer assigned to them. At each grade level, then, three classes with a senior citizen volunteer tried the curriculum, as did three classes without a senior citizen volunteer. During this field-test period, the teachers in each pilot classroom completed review logs for every activity that would be used later in the revision phase of the project. (The total number of teacher involved was 35.)

The curriculum was systematically evaluated in two ways, the results of which are reported below. At the conclusion of the field-test period, the participating teachers completed a questionnaire reflecting on the curriculum and its impact on the students. Also at the conclusion of the curriculum trial, the students who received the curriculum completed an attitude scale on aging and older people. At this same time, the same attitude scale was administered to a control group of students at each grade level who did not receive the curriculum and did not have a senior citizen volunteer.

The final step of this project was the revision of the curriculum. To accomplish this, workshops were scheduled by grade level for all of the teachers from grades 1 to 6 who implemented the curriculum. At these meetings, each activity was scrupulously examined using the teachers' logs. Specific recommendations for improving, discarding, and/or creating new activities were drafted. The project staff, then, assumed the responsibility for completing the revisions using these detailed recommendations.

Evauation Results

The evaluation findings reported here reflect the responses of the participating teachers to a specially-designed questionnaire and the response of participating students to an attitude scale.

Teacher Questionnaire. Identical questionnaires were administered to all of the participating teachers from grades 1 to 6 at the conclusion of the curriculum field-test period. The purpose of the questionnaire was to collect data from the teachers on their judgment of the usuability, appropriateness, and effectiveness of the curriculum. The teacher questionnaires' results revealed that, in the teachers' view, the curriculum definitely had a positive impact on both the children's and the teachers' own attitudes toward aging, was appropriate for children, and was easy for the teachers to use. A detailed summary of these results are contained in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Teacher Questionnaire Results*

1. What impact do you think these curriculum activities had on your children's attitudes toward growing older and older people? (N = 28)

Very good:	36%
Good:	50%
So so:	14%

2. What impact did the curriculum activities have on your own attitudes toward growing older and older people? (N = 29)

Very positive:	28%
Positive:	55%
None:	17%

3. How would you rate the set of curriculum activities with respect to:

a) Structure. (N = 29)

Very easy to use:	31%
Easy to use:	59%
So so:	10%

b) Content appropriateness for your children. (N = 29)

Very appropriate:	52%
Somewhat appropriate:	45%
Somewhat inappropriate:	3%

4. How much freedom did you feel the curriculum activities offered you to utilize your own ideas and originality with respect to the organization and presentation of the activities? (N = 29)

Very much:	48%
Much:	28%
Some:	24%

5. How compatible were the presentation suggestions for these activities with your own teaching style? (N = 29)

Very compatible:	52%
Somewhat compatible:	42%
So so:	3%
Very incompatible:	3%

6. Overall, how did you rate the value of these curriculum activities as they contribute to the total growth of children? (N = 29)

Very good:	34%
Good:	52%
So so:	14%

7. Should these curriculum activities become a part of your school's curriculum? (N = 28)

Definitely yes:	18%
Yes:	60%
Don't care either way:	18%
No:	4%

* Questionnaire was distributed to all 35 participating teachers.

Attitude Scale. Immediately following the conclusion of the curriculum intervention, an attitude scale was administered to the students in the classes with the curriculum and with the curriculum and a senior citizen volunteer (treatment groups). In addition to these classes of students, classes at each grade with neither the curriculum nor senior citizen volunteers (the control groups) were also tested at the same time during the school year.

The purpose of the attitude scale was to assess the students' attitudes toward aging and older people and to determine if there were any differences in attitude between the treatment and control groups of students at each grade level after exposure to just one year's experience of the curriculum in grades 1 to 6. For students in grades 4, 5, and 6 the CATE (Children's Attitudes Toward the Elderly) attitude scale, developed by Jantz et al. (1976), was used. For students in grades 1, 2, and 3 simpler attitude scales were prepared to enable group administration of the tests. Some of the items on these simplified scales, however, correspond to items in the CATE.

With respect to differences between the control and treatment groups at each grade level using the attitude scales, the results revealed no significant differences on most of the items. Those few items in which any significant differences were found, however, showed the treatment group scoring more positively than the control group.

With respect to an assessment of students' attitudes toward aging and older people, furthermore, a very consistent picture emerged. The treatment and control groups of students all had positive attitudes toward older people and aging, a result that runs counter to many of the studies of children's attitudes toward aging and older people cited in the introduction to this paper.

Data from two items from the CATE will help to illustrate these results. The first of these items, which was included on the attitude scales administered to students in grades 1 to 6, is: How do you feel about getting old? The response options to this question for grades 3, 4, 5, and 6 are: (1) good; (2) doesn't matter; and (3) bad. The response options for grades 1 and 2 are: (1) good and (2) bad. The obtained results of this item are contained in Figure 2, below.

Figure 2
Summary of Responses to the Question:
How do you feel about getting old?

	Percentage of Students by Grade					
Response Option	1	2	3	4	5	6
Good	65%	63.2%	39.3%	25%	33.9%	15%
Doesn't Matter			50.0%	50%	54.2%	60%
Bad	35%	36.8%	10.7%	25%	11.9%	25%

Note: Percentages reflect combined responses for students in the control and treatment groups.

The spread of percentages indicates that in all but one grade the least used response by students is "bad." Furthermore, if we consider the response "doesn't matter" to reflect at least a neutral response or at best a marginally positive response, then we can conclude that the vast majority of students at each grade level responded either non-negatively or positively to this question.

The second item illustrating our results is contained only on the CATE and, therefore, was administered just to students in grades 4,5, and 6.

This item is: How will you feel when you are as old as the man in this picture (accompanied by a picture of an older man)? The response options are: (1) good; (2) doesn't matter; and (3) bad. The obtained results for this item are contained in Figure 3, below.

Figure 3
Summary of Responses to the Question:
How will you feel when you are as old as the man in this picture?

Response Option	Percentage of Students by Grade 4	5	6
Good	30%	33%	24%
Doesn't Matter	39%	41%	42%
Bad	30%	25%	33%

Note: Percentages reflect combined responses for students in the control and treatment groups.

As the data for this question indicate, only approximately one-third to one-fourth of the students report that they will feel "bad" when they are as old as the man in the picture. Similar to the preceding item, the interpretation of the "doesn't matter" option is critical to an understanding of this item. If the answer "doesn't matter" is considered to be at least accepting of oneself at the same stage of life as the pictured man, which seems a reasonable assumption, then this option must be valued as a more than neutral and certainly not a negative response. Given this assumption, the data clearly indicate that the majority of students respond positively to this item and reflect a positive view toward their own aging. The results for this and the preceding question directly contradict the results obtained by Seefeldt et al. (1981) who reported that their "curriculum did not significantly change children's negative attitudes toward their own aging" and that "children retained their dislike of growing old" (p. 85).

Discussion

The evaluation results indicate that On Growing Older is indeed having a positive impact on the education of children as perceived by the teachers. Furthermore the teachers reported that in their judgment this curriculum had a favorable impact on children without requiring too much additional preparation by them. The summary judgment by the teachers of the curriculum is that fully 78% of them responded that On Growing Older should become a part of their school's curriculum.

Whether this curriculum had a specific impact on children's attitudes toward aging and older adults is subject to question. On the one hand, the teachers in this study reported in their questionnaires that it did have a positive impact on their students' attitudes. On the other hand the results of the attitude scales revealed almost no significant differences between the treatment and control groups. An attempt to resolve this discrepancy must raise questions of both the teachers' reports and the attitudes' scales. For the teachers, did they actually witness attitude changes or did the curriculum merely provide opportunities for the students to demonstrate positive attitudes toward aging and older adults not previously in evidence. For the attitude scales, (1) was the length of the curriculum intervention too short to result in measurable attitude change; (2) did the students experience too little of the total curriculum (i.e., 1 grade out of 6 grades of the curriculum) to result in measurable attitude change; and (3) are there limitations on the use of objective scales as a sensitive measure of attitudes? Also, as regards the failure to find a significant change in attitudes by the treatment groups compared with the control groups, it is worth noting that even the control groups had positive attitude scores. Given this result, it is less likely to find significant change by the treatment groups when their scores would have had to become even more positive. There was simply less room for change than if the control groups had recorded negative attitude scores, which was expected given the reported results of earlier studies.

On balance, what can then be concluded with repsect to the impact of the curriculum! Given the nature of the questions that were raised above, we at this time

would defer to the professional judgment of the teachers regarding the value of the curriculum in the education of children. Given all of the demands already placed on teachers' time and concerns for accountability for teaching the basics, the teachers' overwhelming acceptance of this curriculum must indicate that in their judgment this curriculum is impacting positively on children.

In reporting the positive attitude of children and older adults, another interesting and important concern emerged. Specifically, the interpretations given to student responses on items from the attitude scales have a critical impact on the conclusions that may be drawn. In this paper, examples were cited of how the interpretations given to the student response "doesn't matter" to questions concerning their feelings about their own aging dramatically alter the conclusion. This study shows that in these instances "doesn't matter" represents at a minimum a neutral response and more likely a slightly positive response. This allows the conclusion to be drawn that children do not feel negatively toward their own aging. These results on the attitude testing, consequently, raise serious questions about the confidence that can be placed in the conclusions drawn by other studies that children have negative attitudes toward older people or their own aging.

Conclusion

A synthesis of the results of the two types of data gathered about On Growing Older, consequently, indicates that it is making an important contribution to the education of children and that this contribution is valued by the teachers. The specific nature of the impact is, however, unclear. It may be in reenforcing children's positive attitudes toward aging and older people and giving them more confidence in their attitude positions, or it may be in giving children an overall understanding and acceptance of themselves and others. What is clear is that the inclusion in the school curriculum of a curriculum on aging is desirable and appropriate.

From the study of this curriculum on aging, moreover, two other issues have emerged. First, there may be philosophical issues related to teaching children

about aging and older people that transcend the rationales for curricula on aging limited to the improvement of attitudes toward aging and older adults. That is, educational programs should include a view of humanity which includes representation of issues relating to people of all ages as well as people of all races and colors. Second, this study raises serious questions about the conclusions reached by other investigations of children's attitudes toward aging and older people. The interpretations given to seemingly innocent language, e.g., "doesn't matter," can have dramatic effects on attitude test results. What is needed, therefore, is: (1) further study of the reasons for teaching children about aging and older people; (2) a careful re-examination of the exisiting studies on children's attitudes toward aging and older adults; and (3) the development of more rigorous and cautious methods for investigating children's attitudes toward aging and older people.

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